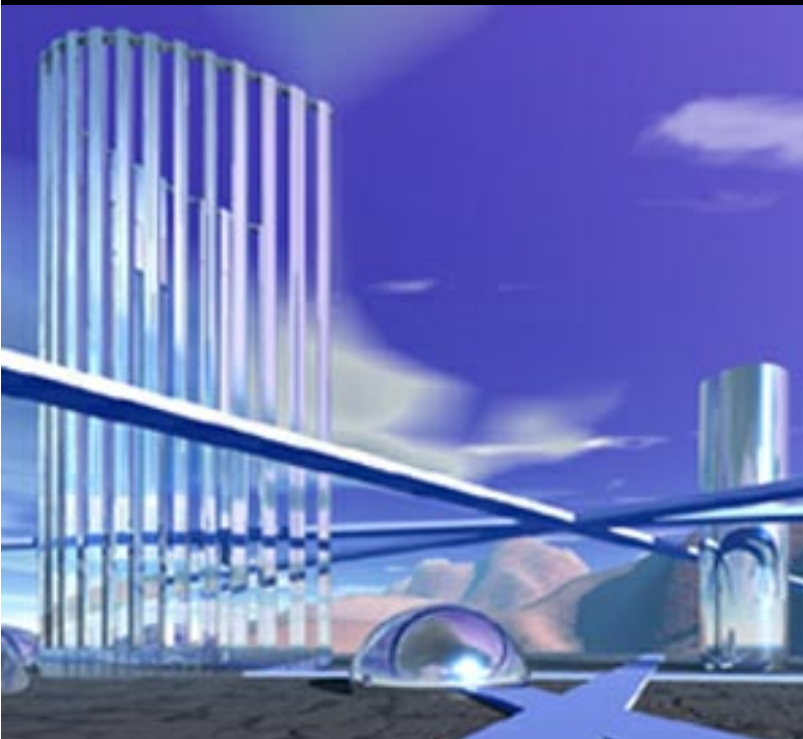


The Alliance



Patricia Waddell

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To DanaRae Pomeroy

Without your guidance and encouragement THE
ALLIANCE would have remained an idea.

Your friendship allowed it to become a reality.

Here's to the future and all it holds.



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Chapter 1



The Alliance Empire
Reign of the Sixth House
The Planet Pyrali

“I have found a suitable female, my lord.”

The advisor waited patiently for the Governor’s reaction. His master, Lord Shatar, was Cadish of the Seventh Noble House, a rank honored throughout the Alliance.

“So, Minlim, am I to mate with a Zadoc or a Jabecian?” Reuel Shatar finally asked. His composure was deceiving. The necessity of taking an alien female to produce an heir for the Seventh House of the Alliance was just that—a necessity.

Minlim smiled, allowing his pale eyes to show the humor so few knew lay beneath them. “I fear a Jabecian could not carry your seed to completion, my lord. They are an extremely industrious species, but dwarfs, nevertheless.”

“I would have no need of any female, but an

Adarian, if fate had not set its hand against me,” Lord Shatar replied harshly, rubbing the small scar on his forearm. It was ludicrous that an insect, no larger than his thumbnail, had changed destiny with a single nibble of flesh.

“I think the female will be adequate for your purposes, my lord. She is young, healthy and, as you requested, slightly less docile than a kislá.”

The corners of Reuel’s mouth lifted, stopping just short of a smile. There were several kislá in the palace. The large felines were known for their insatiable appetites for sleep. They woke, blinked opaque eyes, stretched furry limbs, and then ate. Once done with that task, they curled their long, bushy tails over their noses and went back to sleep. The one slumbering on the bench under the viewing window had been there for the last three days, unconcerned that he’d trespassed into the Governor’s private office.

“I have yet to have a female fall asleep while I am mounting her, Minlim, but I appreciate your concern.” Green eyes, framed by ebony brows, reflected the Governor’s amusement. “Now that the issue of her alertness has been addressed, tell me more about the female who will bear the next Cadish of the Seventh House. What species will have the honor of mixing their blood with mine?”

“She is an Earthling, my lord.”

Standing up so quickly, he almost overturned the goblet of wine resting by his right hand, the

Governor of Pyrali reacted just as Minlim had anticipated.

“An Earthling!”

Minlim said nothing as he rubbed the jeweled amulet around his neck. Etched with the insignia of the Seventh House, it designated his rank as advisor.

“You expect me to plant my seed in an Earthling’s womb? Have you finally reached the age where your wisdom no longer lingers in your head?” Reuel roared the insult. Adarians were born warriors and leaders, a heritage he was proud to claim. As Governor of Pyrali he was second only to the Cadish of the High Council in rank and importance.

Minlim continued stroking the amulet.

“Don’t just stand there. Tell me why this female is so suitable,” Reuel grumbled, pacing the length of the office adjacent to his private sleeping quarters. He stopped midway in the room, giving Minlim a skeptical look. “I warn you, old friend, your logic had better be impeccable. I am not in the mood to play one of your ethereal mind games.”

“It is, as always, my duty to serve you,” Minlim replied, speaking in the low, leisurely tones that so often tested his master’s patience.

“I ask for an amiable female to sire my son and you offer me an impulsive Earthling. I know little of the species. What I do know, tells me they are irresponsible, ill-mannered and unworthy.”

“They have only been with us a few short years, my lord. Although, I must admit I find their spirits adventurous,” Minlim added.

“Adventurous.” The Governor of Pyrali practically snorted the word. “They are rude and insolent. Thank the stars, they’re confined to Pyrali. I shudder to think what rebellion they could foster were they spread throughout the galaxy.”

“Each race contributes to the Creator’s plan in their own way, my lord. Granted, Earthlings can be somewhat illogical in their attitudes.”

“You mean irrational,” Reuel responded harshly. “I understand there is an Earthling, confined to the Penal Quarters at this moment, who has the impudence to ask that their race be given a seat on the Planetary Council. They compose less than five percent of the planet’s population, yet they think they have a right to raise their voices in its governing. The idea is preposterous.”

“Perhaps this individual thought they could contribute to the advisory panel, my lord. Although the Earthlings comprise a small portion of the population, they are a highly intelligent and creative species. They have adapted well in the three generations they have been among us.”

“They have adapted, because we have encouraged them to do so. There were barely four hundred of them alive when their transport vessel crashed on the third moon. Without the compassion of the

Ruling Council, their race would have been left to survive on its own. They owe the Alliance their loyalty, not their ridicule.”

“Be that as it may, my lord, would you place the imperfections of an entire race on the shoulders of one female?” Minlim inquired calmly.

He should know better than to debate with a Haodai. In the twenty years since Minlim had come to him, Reuel had yet to win an argument with the silver-haired mystic.

Reuel walked to the large windows which comprised the western wall of his office. Regardless of his emotions or his preferences, the Alliance must survive. The peace that prospered in the galaxy was due to the strict code of honor and discipline the founding families believed was more precious than individual life. It was order, irreversible loyalty to an idea, that maintained the peace. It didn't matter if Reuel wanted a wife. Duty demanded that he take one. It didn't matter that the thought of mating with a female of another species did little to arouse him. It was necessary, therefore it would be done.

“Why an Earthling? There are hundreds of species in the Alliance, surely one of them has a female that will serve my purpose as well as this one?”

“Only half of those species are biologically compatible with Adarians, my lord. Earth women strongly resemble your own race. Their reproduc-

tive organs are almost identical. The female's genetic patterns have shown the mixed breeding would be successful. She can give you the heir you require."

Reuel was relieved that he wouldn't have to mate with an undersized Jabecian or a gangly Zadoc with yellow eyes. If he had to take an alien to his bed, he supposed an Earthling would be more sexually compatible. Performing the act wouldn't be the difficult part. Taking an Earthling as his wife was an entirely different matter. Adarian females were soft-spoken and graciously obliging. The thought of spending the remainder of his life bound to an unpredictable, impulsive Earthling had little appeal.

"Favian, my flight lieutenant, took an Earthling to his bed. He said he could barely tolerate her impertinent behavior for the short time he kept her in the mating chamber." Reuel turned around and looked at his advisor, his hands fisted behind his back. "I forewarn you, Minlim, if this female cannot keep her opinions to herself, I will abide her presence only when I am joining with her. I'll not have my duties interrupted by a disruptive woman."

The advisor's response was delayed by a request to enter the Governor's presence. Silence greeted the Adarian female with dark hair and pale eyes as she entered the private office.

She stood quietly until Reuel gave her permission

to speak.

“Forgive my intrusion, lord brother, but a communication has arrived from Lady Katala. She wishes that I inform you of her arrival.”

The Governor turned his face, hiding his frown from Taraza, his only sister. She served as hostess in the Governor’s Palace, a role that would shortly be assumed by his wife.

“I was not aware Lady Katala planned on visiting Pyrali,” Reuel remarked, silently cursing fate once again. Katala was the daughter of Lord Dyson, his father’s closest friend. It had been assumed for years that one day the two families would be joined by marriage. An assumption circumstances now forced him to end.

“When?” Reuel asked, knowing his sister presumed Lady Katala’s arrival would be the prologue to a wedding announcement.

Taraza smiled. “She has taken passage on Suriel’s ship. They will arrive within the week. Our brother said to tell you he is anxious to see you again.”

“As I anxiously await his arrival,” Reuel replied, intentionally omitting Lady Katala’s name. His sister noticed the exclusion.

“Should I reply to Lady Katala, my lord?” Taraza inquired, her eyes asking the question Adarian protocol restricted her tongue from speaking.

“No,” Reuel said. “I will contact the star cruiser

after my discussion with Minlim has ended. You may go.”

“As you wish, my lord,” Taraza replied softly, bowing her head before she turned and left the room.

The Governor waited until the doors had closed before turning to Minlim. “My family will think I’ve lost my mind.”

“Unless you explain the necessity of taking an alien as your wife, there is little you can do, my lord, but let them think as they wish.”

“Don’t be so irritably diplomatic, old friend,” Reuel snapped. “I made no secret of my plans to take Katala to wife once she reached the age of agreement. Now I must insult her as well as my family’s friendship with her house.”

“You must do what you must do,” Minlim pointed out. “To produce the next heir is your function as the eldest son. The stability of the Alliance depends upon your dedication.”

“I need no reminder of my duty,” Reuel said harshly. “It is, and always has been, the core of my existence.”

The advisor remained silent.

“Tell me about her,” Reuel finally said, returning to his panoramic view of the capitol city.

“She is, as I said, young and healthy,” Minlim replied before calmly reciting the facts outlined in the female’s biological records. “Her grandfather was the operations officer on the transport ship

that crashed on Belina. All of her kinsmen are dead except for one uncle who is assigned to the Agricultural Bureau. She was educated in the communal schools, excelling above many of her Pyralian classmates.”

Reuel turned around. His muscular frame cast an ominous shadow on the metallic floor as he fisted his hands over his hips and stared at the one person he could truly call a friend.

“I’m more concerned with her attitudes toward the Alliance than I am with her academic achievements. I have never been of the opinion that educating females beyond their maternal duties classified a species as progressive. Earthlings are far too generous in their attitudes toward their women to please me.”

“The Creator gave male and female to each species. Each to perform an appointed function, I agree, but each having gifts only fully appreciated when joined in harmony,” Minlim replied patiently.

“We can debate the Creator’s galactic wisdom another time, old friend. You have found an Earthling female for me. I wish to know what it is about her that makes her more suitable than another.”

The command was given in the authoritative tone of a Governor. Minlim responded, plainly stating the reason he had selected the Earthling over the other candidates he had screened for Reuel’s purpose.

“The medical scans have been run three times to confirm their accuracy. Your genetic patterns are extremely compatible. If mated with you, there is no doubt she would provide you a son. Statistically, there is a strong possibility that if she bore you ten children, eight of them would be males.”

The implication of Minlim’s words vibrated against the walls of the oval suite, returning to Reuel’s ears again and again. To know his seed could bring forth sons quickly dispelled any arguments he might have found against the advisor’s choice. He must have a son. To have more than one son meant the security of his house. If the original heir was felled by disease or death there would be another to take his place. The House of Shatar would prosper if his seed proved fruitful in the Earthling’s womb.

“You are certain?” Reuel asked bluntly.

“I am certain, my lord,” Minlim replied, knowing the debate had come to an end.

“Where is she?” Reuel inquired, sounding uninterested. One of the few times Favian had commented on the Earthling female he’d taken to his mating chamber had been to say that mating with her had been most pleasurable. It seemed, in spite of their many irritating tendencies, Earthling females were quite passionate. Reuel had to admit that discovering for himself if an Earthling female’s sexual appetite could match his own was

somewhat intriguing.

The Governor's thoughts didn't keep him from seeing Minlim's reluctance in answering the last question.

"Where is the female?" Reuel repeated the question, something he rarely did.

"In the Penal Quarters, my lord. She is the Earthling who requested representation from the Pyrali Council."

"By the Martyrs of Bagali, have you lost your senses! First you want me to mix the seed of a noble family with an Earthling. Then you have the audacity to tell me the Earthling you have selected is now being held in the Penal Quarters for speaking treason."

"You commissioned me to find a female who could conceive the next Cadish. I have done so, my lord. My most humble regrets if my service does not please you."

Reuel was more shocked than angry. He'd viewed the transcripts of the preliminary hearing held in the Gallery the previous day. The female had announced that any government which refused its citizens representation was comprised of nothing more than prejudicial tyrants. Reuel had thought the words eloquent, but foolish. The Ruling Council was an advanced form of government. The majority ruled. Not even the High Cadish could overturn the final decision of the Council.

"I sought a compliant female, not a rebel,"

Reuel said, marching across the room and pouring himself some wine.

“Freedom to voice one’s thoughts is a granted right of the Alliance, my lord. To seek that right before a planetary council is given to any citizen of the empire. The female did not breach the law.”

“Not until she had the eyes and ears of the Council, my trusted friend. Then she came close to treason with her vicious accusations of suppression and prejudice. Erling was within his rights to hold her for further questioning. Her own words cast her in a cloak of suspicion, not the government she so strongly criticizes.”

“She is young, my lord, and perhaps overly exuberant,” Minlim defended the woman who was scheduled to face the Council the next day for further interrogation.

“She is rebellious, ungrateful and very close to being exiled to Ritsa,” Reuel stated firmly, ignoring Minlim’s compromising tone. “Perhaps a few years in a habitation hut, with only her thoughts as company, will gain her the maturity you seem to think she will one day find.”

“Perhaps, my lord. Though I have found maturity is more easily gained if one is guided by a patient hand.”

Reuel laughed. “You think the warrior in me will rise to the challenge of taming your little Earthling.”

“You have trained squadrons of starpilots, my

lord. Young males, once unseasoned and foolish, line the ranks of our First Forces because of your tutelage. Does not patience usually achieve that which impatience so often leaves undone?”

“I’m not a patient man, Minlim, and well you know it,” Reuel retorted.

“I must disagree, my lord. You can be most patient when you know your forbearance will gain that which you seek.”

Reuel’s emerald eyes took on a look of anticipation. “You’re right. It is time I met this Earthling. I wonder how your little rebel will react when she discovers her body will soon nurture the next High Cadish?”

“I fear she will be less than receptive to the concept, my lord,” Minlim replied, following his master toward the doors that led to the main hall of the Governor’s Palace. “She is, as you so eloquently described, an unpredictable Earthling.”

“As long as her womb is predictable,” Reuel said, motioning for his private aircoach to be readied. “As for her defiant nature, that can be easily tamed. Once inside my mating chamber, she will be too busy breeding my sons to breed rebellion.”

Her accommodations were quite elegant for a prison. The small parlor and bedroom, decorated in shades of dark green and gold, the colors of the Alliance, offered Christa ample room to pace as

she contemplated the consequences of her actions.

Brushing a wild lock of tawny hair away from her face, Christa walked to the balcony. Stepping outside, she watched the Gallery guards change shifts in the courtyard beneath her comfortable cage. Though it was the middle of Pyrali's summer, Christa wrapped her arms around herself to ward off an inner chill.

She'd done it this time!

Daran had warned her repeatedly that her impulsive tongue would get her into trouble. Knowing that her outspoken opinions would once again cause her good-natured friend to worry made Christa sad. They'd grown up together, an adventurous little girl and a cautious young boy. They'd been playmates, then friends. Daran seemed to be the only person who understood she didn't intentionally cause trouble.

Since graduating from the Academy, they'd remained friends, but their relationship had changed. Daran had grown into a man, one who wanted to succeed in his vocation and eventually take a wife. Christa had accepted a position teaching in the small academy reserved for children whose parents traveled throughout the Alliance, requiring her to live on the private campus and be guardian as well as instructor. The position suited her purposes for now. She enjoyed working with the younger members of the various species that inhabited Pyrali.

Daran said it was because she'd yet to grow up herself. Christa insisted it was because she preferred to surround herself with those yet untutored in prejudice and bigotry.

If Daran was here now, he'd lecture her until she yawned. As always, she'd let her zealous enthusiasm overrule her common sense. Why hadn't she merely smiled at the Council and sweetly asked them to consider allowing one, solitary Earthling to join their ranks? Why hadn't she blinked her dark eyes and coyly suggested that their foresight would become legendary, if they gave her people representation? Why?

Because she didn't have a coy bone in her body and she hadn't smiled sweetly at a man since her sixth birthday, when she'd convinced her father to give her the present he'd hidden in his pocket. Christa had dedicated her life to learning the history of her people, not acquiring the flirtatious skills other women used to get a wedding amulet. She wanted nothing to do with being legally bound to a man who would quickly change from admiring lover to domineering mate once the ceremony had been performed.

Since crashing on Pyrali's moon, the males of her race had unfortunately regressed, quickly adapting the archaic social standards of the Pyralians and the Adarians. In the study of her people's history, Christa had learned that Earth females had long ago reached the status of equals.

After only one hundred and fifty years on an alien planet, the men of her race had conveniently forgotten the equality of the sexes. Aiding the regression was the Alliance's firm belief that males reigned supreme.

When she'd suggested that a woman might best represent the cause of her people, Counsellor Erling had turned pale. Moments later, he'd gritted his teeth. By the end of Christa's appeal, the honored legislator had ordered her removed and confined for further questioning.

She'd managed, in less than fifteen minutes, to be labeled a fanatic and a rebel. The High Counsellor was probably having a difficult time deciding which asteroid out of the millions that comprised the Great Barrier Zone would be her future home.

Christa watched Pyrali's second moon rise slowly into the evening sky. The gates of the Gallery became dark shadows, blocking her view of the freedom just beyond their locked doors, as muted twilight turned into night. A sharp beep, signifying the door of her cell being unlocked, interrupted her thoughts.

When Daran stepped inside the small parlor, Christa smiled and raced into his arms.

"I wasn't sure they'd allow me visitors," she said, hugging the young man she loved like a brother.

“If you’d told me you’d requested an audience with the Council, I would have gone with you,” Daran scolded, pushing her back so she could see him frown.

“You would have tried to talk me out of speaking,” Christa said, frowning in return.

“You did more than speak, Christa. Speaking doesn’t get you locked in the Penal Quarters. Treason does.”

“I am not a traitor,” Christa insisted, looking at her friend over her shoulder as she walked to the serving table across the room and sat a small carafe of herbal tea on the warming sensor. “What got me locked in this cell was the courage to disagree with the mighty Alliance.”

Daran shook his head. Taking off his cloak, he offered Christa a small smile. “Couldn’t you have disagreed a little less forcefully? I had hoped you could join me to celebrate my application review.”

“Not again, Daran? You’ve applied to the Mining Administration for the last three years. No Earthling has ever been allowed to supervise one of the Alliance’s precious halamyte mines,” Christa replied, wishing Daran would understand one of the reasons she had spoken so forcefully to the Council was to rectify that kind of prejudice.

“There will be a first time, Christa. I hope it will be my application that breaks the tradition,” Daran said optimistically. “I am concerned since the underwater mining has been escalated. There

have been reports of some minor tremors on the southern continent.”

“And you want to help.” Christa managed a weak smile, then handed him a cup of tea. “I know you could, if only they’d let you. That’s why our voice, as a people, is so important. That’s why I had to risk speaking out.”

“You have risked much,” Daran replied, his optimism fading as Christa sat down beside him.

“I know,” she whispered, cradling her cup of tea in her hands. “I’m to be questioned again tomorrow. I suppose, unless I can convince the Council I’m an emotional female who’s let the moons effect her thinking, I’ll be...” Christa couldn’t bring herself to say exiled. The word held too much finality.

“Then convince them,” Daran said. “The same way you convinced your uncle to let you live with my family and attend the Academy. I have yet to see such an inspiring performance from any of Pyrali’s renowned actors.”

Christa didn’t say anything. Bowing to the Council wasn’t a scene she planned to play. She’d spent most of her life fighting the patriarchal attitudes that ruled Alliance culture. She’d continue to fight them.

“I’ll be with you,” Daran said, reaching out and taking her hand in his. “You won’t be alone.”

“Thank you.” Christa clutched his hand. “But, I’d rather be alone. Your reputation has been

tarnished enough as it is. Gloriana wouldn't talk to you for weeks after she found out you and I were friends."

"She's forgiven me." Daran's amber eyes sparkled. "So much so she's agreed to marry me."

"That's wonderful," Christa shrieked, sitting her cup on the floor, then throwing her arms around Daran's shoulders. "She's been in love with you for years."

"And I with her," Daran laughed. "I thought, perhaps once I'd married Gloriana, I might be able to persuade you to accept her brother's invitation to attend the Feast of Belina with us."

"Stop matchmaking." Christa wiggled her nose at him. "Matheli is a very handsome man, but I'm not interested in men."

"They're interested in you," Daran persisted. A slow, repetitive beep told them his allotted time had come to an end.

"Not once they get to know me," Christa replied, wishing Daran could stay and dispel her worry with another of his smiles. "Once they find out I can think for myself their interest fades like snow in sunlight."

"You've never seen snow," Daran said, tossing his cloak over his shoulders, then pulling her into his arms for another hug.

"Grandfather wrote all about it in his journal," Christa said confidently. "It's as white as starlight and as cold as an Adarian's heart."

“Be careful of your tongue, Christa,” Daran warned in a low whisper. “This isn’t the time or place to be insulting your hosts.”

Christa shrugged. “I already have. That’s why I’m here.”

“I’ll come and see you again tomorrow,” Daran assured her, leaning down and planting a chaste kiss on her forehead. Neither of them admitted that tomorrow evening might well find Christa on her way to a penal colony.

Chapter 2



The sentry came to attention, his booted heels clicking together, as his body went rigid inside the confines of his green uniform. The single gold braid adorning his left shoulder declared him a veteran of service to the Alliance. The elderly soldier now guarded any suspected enemies of the empire.

“The Governor wishes to see the prisoner,” Minlim stated, stepping silently in front of Reuel.

“She has a visitor, my lord,” the guard said, looking past the advisor to his commanding officer.

“Where is the viewing room?” Reuel asked, curious, but hiding it under the mask of indifference he’d learned as a child.

“There, my lord.” The guard pointed toward a door, directly across the hall from his post.

Reuel nodded, then walked toward the viewing room.

Minlim followed. The metallic door closed behind them with a hiss of compressed air. Reuel

walked to the monitoring console and punched in the numerical code for the female's cell. The image of Christa Kirklan being embraced by her visitor filled the screen. Reuel listened attentively as his future wife described snow.

Her features weren't as displeasing as her opinion. In fact, she was strikingly beautiful for an Earthling. Reuel qualified the thought as he watched her follow the man to the door.

When she turned her back on the monitor Reuel had selected to view the holding cell, he quickly reached out and selected a multiple view of the room. Five additional monitors allowed him to see his intended bride from various angles.

Telling himself it was only curiosity, Reuel concentrated on the female's movements. She was taller than most women of her species. Her hips pressed against the soft fabric of her mynara. The dark-colored dress flared into a full skirt as it reached her knees, stopping an inch above feet encased in soft leather slippers.

Reuel frowned when the viewing monitor offered him a profile of the female's upper body. No matter how many species he encountered, he'd never grown accustomed to seeing females with permanent breasts. Adarian women were slenderly curved. Their milk glands only became prominent when they were suckling their young.

When the female smiled at her visitor, asking him not to worry over her situation, Reuel felt the

muscles in his body clench as though he'd received a blow to his midsection.

When she turned around, unintentionally facing the main scanner, Reuel felt his supposedly superior Adarian senses react again. This time the sensation surged upward from his groin, spiraling through his chest like a cosmic cloud. Christa Kirklan had the smile of an innocent child, formed by lips meant for a man's kiss.

Disgusted with himself for losing his control, if only momentarily, Reuel reached out and turned off the scanning sensors. Minlim's subtle smile told Reuel he hadn't been able to shield his thoughts from the Haodai's receptive mind. Inherently trained never to let anyone get an advantage, Reuel marched toward the door, refusing to acknowledge the vulnerability his advisor had sensed.

"It seems our little rebel hasn't yet learned to temper her tongue," he said, stopping for a moment while the doors slid silently into the wall pockets that housed them. Stepping into the corridor, Reuel waited for Minlim to join him. Once the advisor was outside the monitoring room the sensors allowed the doors to close.

"So it would seem, my lord," Minlim said, staying a respectable distance behind Reuel as they approached the door to Christa's cell.

"Perhaps she'll change her opinion once she's spent a few nights in my bed," Reuel said gruffly,

motioning for the guard to unlock the cell.

When Christa saw the man strolling into her cell as though he owned the galaxy, she opened her mouth to protest the rude invasion of her privacy. She clamped it shut, keeping her words inside, when she saw the gold insignia on his uniform.

This man wasn't another penal guard, sent to escort her to the medical unit for another barrage of tests. He moved too gracefully to be a jailer. The dark green of his uniform was the rich color of a high ranking official in the Alliance government. The silver cape, anchored with metallic braids at the top of his shoulders, fanned out behind him as he marched into the room like a conquering hero.

Christa studied her uninvited guest and felt her senses go numb. Adarian males weren't uncommon on Pyrali. They commanded almost every aspect of the planet's economic spectrum, especially the vast wealth of minerals hidden beneath the seas. She was accustomed to their size and appearance as well as their aloof behavior and intimidating stares.

There was nothing vague about this Adarian's gaze. He was looking at her with the jeweled stare of a predatory animal. Christa felt trapped in a magnetic current, unable to move, held motionless by invisible bands of pulsating energy. Looking into his emerald eyes, Christa saw more than a

ruggedly handsome face etched with lines of experience. She saw the essence of a man who commanded respect with nothing more than his attitude.

Christa couldn't keep from feeling his presence. It spanned the short distance between them, filling it with a power that lacked physical substance, yet shouting its existence in a silence that made her head spin and her pulse race.

“Christa, this is Lord Shatar.”

Minlim's softly spoken introduction shattered the delicate intensity that had held Christa captive. She stepped back, still staring at the tall Adarian. It took a moment for Minlim's declaration to penetrate the haze seeping through Christa's senses.

Lord Shatar was the Governor of Pyrali! He was also a member of the Alliance Ruling Council. The combination made him one of the most powerful men in the galaxy.

Was she to be banished without having an opportunity to defend herself in front of the Council? The Governor had the power of the Alliance on his side. He could wield it like an ancient sword. If he believed her a traitor, his words could send her into exile.

“My lord, this is Christa Kirklan,” Minlim continued the introduction, coming to stand at Christa's side.

Something about the advisor's closeness eased the tension in her body. Christa didn't bother to

question her reaction. Instead, she tried to tap into the tranquil aura surrounding the slender gentleman, needing the composure it offered.

The Governor continued to stare at her. Christa knew he was waiting for her to display the customary sign of greeting, one designed to show a woman's subservience in a society ruled by men. She neither bowed her head nor lowered her eyes. Motionless, except for the blood racing through her veins, Christa waited for the Governor to decide her fate.

"Would you add insolence to the charges against you?" Reuel asked, demanding the respect that was his due.

His tone was as arrogant as his stare. He was appraising her like a merchant inspecting bottles of sangra for shipment to the northern sectors. The longer he looked the shorter the fuse on Christa's temper became. She reminded herself that her tongue had gotten her into enough trouble for one day.

"No, my lord." Christa almost choked on the greeting. "I seek only my freedom."

"With words that hint of treason?" He eyed her suspiciously.

"My words hinted at nothing, Lord Governor. They simply stated a desire to see my people represented on a world they now call home," Christa said distinctly, her courage returning as the Governor's gaze grew harder.

To show the fear making her feet cold and her mouth dry would be admitting guilt. She wasn't guilty of anything except wanting what every other species on the planet took for granted—the right to have an Earthling sit on the planetary council.

The Governor took a menacing step toward her. Christa didn't move.

“A world that offered them shelter after the crash of a colony ship. A world that allowed them to remain, alien or not, offering them a home they now seem to think unsuitable,” Reuel retorted.

Watching the female on the viewing screen had disturbed him. Standing so close he could smell her scent was having an even stronger affect on him. An affect he didn't like.

“My people do not think Pryali unfit, my lord. They merely want what others have been given freely. Representation to have their concerns voiced and their opinions heard.”

“Your people, or yourself?” he asked, folding his hands behind his back as though he was questioning a wayward child.

The gesture pricked Christa's temper. Her eyes grew even darker. “What difference does it make, my lord? The Council didn't seem interested in hearing even one Earthling voice a complaint.”

His little rebel had courage, Reuel thought. She had yet to learn the art of tempering it with wisdom—but she would. By the time she delivered his first son, Christa's fiery personality would be

gentled to warm embers. The female had the audacity to think herself equal to a noble of the Alliance. She had a lot to learn. Reuel decided it would be his pleasure to teach her.

“The Council is willing to hear any complaint from a citizen of Pryali. But you didn’t complain, *cassana*, you ranted like a wuta in the midst of a mating frenzy.”

Having her appearance in front of the Council compared to the erotic dance of a tree frog did little to improve Christa’s mood. She was about to tell the Governor what he could do with his opinion when she realized his voice had changed. He’d called her something...*cassana*? His eyes had changed, too. For the short span of a second they’d softened.

Christa’s curiosity, her greatest downfall, according to Daran, overruled her temper.

“What does *cassana* mean?”

The Governor smiled, or at least Christa thought it was a smile. It was hard to tell, when his eyes had turned to stone.

“Nothing,” Reuel said quickly. The endearment had slipped out. If he told the Earthling the word’s meaning, she’d probably reach for the small dagger sheathed and hanging from his belt. Reuel didn’t doubt that if provoked, her anger would be an interesting display of female emotions.

“I prefer to hear insults tossed at me in a language I can understand, Lord Governor. It

makes them easier to return.” Christa clasped her hands behind her back, imitating his stance and hiding her trembling hands at the same time. She hadn’t won more than one political debate at the Academy by being afraid of words.

“I have better things to do than throw insults at an Earthling,” Reuel said impassively. “The expression was merely descriptive of your actions.”

“Then, am I to assume you’re here to hear my defense against the suspicions cast by the Council?” Christa asked, hoping it wasn’t true. The thought of pleading for anything from this man made her stomach knot and her self-respect go into revolt. He was the most arrogant man she’d ever encountered. No wonder he was Governor. The Ruling Council couldn’t have chosen a better example of male conceit.

Reuel knew he should answer the question affirmatively. It would give the impudent Earthling something to worry about. Minlim had been right. The female sparked his sense of adventure. Taming the fire burning in her dark eyes challenged his masculine senses in a way no other female ever had. If joining with her was half as enjoyable as conversing, there’d be no duty in producing his son, only pleasure.

“I am here because I found myself curious about a female who dared to call my Counsellor narrowed-minded and short-sighted.” Reuel quoted her words back at her. “Erling is an honorable

man who has served Pyrali most of his life. When you face the Council tomorrow, be sure your tongue finds the appropriate words to apologize to him for the insult he has done nothing to earn.”

Christa felt adequately chastised by the time Reuel finished. She met his gaze again, then softened her tone. “I tend to get overly enthusiastic at times, my lord.”

“Then I suggest you find another release for your eagerness,” he recommended dryly, denying the smile her reply inspired. “Insulting officials of the Alliance will gain you nothing but an isolation hut on a frigid asteroid.”

“My people’s history is filled with those who willingly died to gain their freedom,” Christa said, inflamed that he thought so little of what she held so dear.

This time Reuel did smile.

“I think the Alliance can find a more useful purpose for your enthusiasm, *cassana*.”

Before Christa could ask what purpose, the Governor turned and left the room. Minlim gave her a fleeting smile before he followed his master from the penal cell.

Reuel maneuvered the aircoach through Dacla, the capital city, with the skill of a garment maker weaving thread. The city’s crystal towers flashed by in a rainbow of refracted light. As he steered the anti-gravity aircoach toward the inland sea of

Saionge that separated the Governor's Palace from the large city, his mind returned to the dark-eyed maiden with a stinging tongue.

She was, as he'd expected, undisciplined and overly vocal. She was also extremely desirable. He found himself wanting Christa Kirklan with an urgency that made his loins knot and his palms sweat. He'd been too long without a female. It wasn't like him to react so fiercely to the mere sight of a woman.

They had almost reached the palace when Minlim asked the inevitable question. "Shall I have the lady moved to the palace, my lord?"

"Not yet," Reuel replied. "Time for her to think will serve my purpose."

"She is quite charming, don't you agree?"

"She is what she is," Reuel replied, knowing the advisor had sensed his strong reaction to the female.

"Shall I present your proposal?"

"No. I want the pleasure of telling the lady her fate."

"Then you expect her agreement?"

The governor laughed. "No, I expect her wrath. But that is of little consequence. She will be whatever I want her to be."

Minlim's expression said he wasn't so sure. "Perhaps diplomacy would work better than tyranny, my lord?"

"You must defer to my experience, old friend.

Your race is not burdened by sexual need. The way to the female's cooperation is not in her head, it's in her body. I will not hesitate to exploit that need if it will gain her assistance. I have no intention of revealing my motive for taking her as my wife, nor are you to tell her anything that will make my position less than what it will be, her husband and lord."

"As you wish," Minlim replied.

Regardless of Minlim's advice, Reuel knew it wouldn't be advantageous to let Christa know he wanted her in any way other than as a vessel to relieve his sexual appetite. He wasn't a fool. This lushly curved female was entirely too smart for her own good, no doubt the result of too much academic freedom and too little male supervision.

Christa had to accept his authority. She had to accept him as her lord and master. To let her do anything less was inviting disaster. Once he took her as his wife, he would be as committed to her life as she must be to his. Christa would test his patience, but in the end he would have what he wanted.

An heir.

Still, he preferred his life orderly. If Minlim, in his unique way, could soften Christa's resistance, it would help to expedite her assimilation into Adarian society. No easy task if the lady was to be judged by her actions.

"How would you convince our rebel to give up

her defiant ways?" Reuel asked, turning the aircoach toward the north gate of the Governor's palace.

"Logic, my lord."

Reuel laughed.

"If properly enticed, the feminine mind has an impressive ability to analyze," Minlim stated positively.

Reuel didn't bother to ask how his advisor had reached such a ridiculous conclusion. "Let her doubts increase until tomorrow. Then plant your diplomatic seeds, if you must, but keep them discreetly evasive."

The palace guards stepped aside as the aircoach floated into the docking area. Minlim waited until the coach had been secured and the guards dismissed before speaking again.

"What of Lady Katala, my lord?"

"I seem to be surrounded by female induced problems," Reuel sighed wearily. "I can only hope the insult to her will not shatter the bond between our families."

"Time will vindicate your actions," Minlim said assuringly.

"Perhaps," Reuel remarked. "Unfortunately, I have little of it. My brother's cruiser will be arriving very soon."

"Then the wedding should take place immediately," Minlim suggested.

"I agree, but it will take time to prepare our rebel for her wedding day. Tradition demands our

vows be spoken in the ancient tongue. I doubt she knows it.”

“Few in the empire do, my lord.” Minlim pointed out.

The doors to Reuel’s private chamber opened. Stepping inside, he removed his cloak. In his haste to meet Minlim’s selection, he’d neglected to eat the evening meal. His sister, devoted as always, had left a tray of fresh fruit and spiced meats on the serving table next to his desk. Reuel filled a crystal plate with the food Taraza had prepared.

Time.

It was the one thing his rank and wealth could not purchase. There was much to do if the marriage was to take place before Suriel’s ship docked on Pyrali. First he had to convince Christa to agree to the marriage. Then he had to face his brother and Katala. Neither task would be easy, even for a man of his persuasive abilities. Although it wasn’t illegal for an Adarian nobleman to wed outside his species, it was extremely rare. His position as Cadish of the Seventh House would make his actions unquestionable, but he had no desire to disturb his family with unsettling thoughts. The next few weeks would be difficult ones, beginning with the impetuous female he would soon honor with the title of Lady Shatar.

But first things first. Protocol required that she be schooled in the old language as well as the

duties she would assume once she became his wife. Turning to Minlim, Reuel took the initial step toward finalizing his plot.

“You speak ancient Adarian better than I do,” Reuel noted. “Who better to instruct our little rebel than the man who thinks she is so suitable?”

“I am flattered you think I can accomplish so great a task in such short a time, my lord.”

“I have faith in your ability to see all is done as it should be,” Reuel said, smiling.

“I am honored,” Minlim replied.

“And I hope I haven’t lost my noble mind,” Reuel countered, wishing for the first time that duty didn’t dictate his life.

Christa stood in the center of the tiled floor, embossed with the emblem of the Alliance, and stared at the closed door. The Governor of Pyrali had been curious about her. For some unknown reason, simmering in the depths of her mind, she knew it was more than inquisitiveness that had brought the planet’s magistrate to her cell. A reason, Christa sensed, she wasn’t going to like.

She dimmed the lights by speaking softly into the command panel and turned toward the small, sleeping room where she’d found little slumber the previous night. She undressed, folding her smock and mynara before slipping between the temperature-controlled bedding. Folding her hands over her stomach, Christa stared at the

metallic ceiling.

She might be impulsive, as Daran insisted, or temperamental, as her uncle often complained, but she wasn't dishonest. Not with others and never with herself. She'd felt something pass between herself and Lord Shatar. She'd felt the power of his gaze. In the short seconds before he spoke to her, she'd experienced a riotous sense of expectation so strong it had been almost prophetic. The puzzling sensation had started in the center of her body, then expanded its domain. At first, she'd been frightened, then the sensation had changed, becoming more a tingling surge of anticipation than fear.

Christa forced herself to close her eyes and take deep breaths. She needed to sleep. She'd need her wits about her to keep from falling into the trap the High Council no doubt had planned. She'd insulted their male egos, a sin considered intolerable in a nation ruled by men.

If she had any hope of walking out of the Gallery a free woman, she needed to concentrate on her own eloquent trap. Hopefully, she'd be able to convince the Council of her sincere regrets without actually saying she was sorry. If not, she'd bear their verdict with a head raised high in defiance.

Chapter 3



“Counsellor Erling is here, my lord,” the Borkian servant announced in the raspy voice associated with his species.

“Let him enter,” Reuel replied, barely noticing the docile attendant. The Borkians had been members of the Alliance for several hundred years. Unlike a certain Earthling who was occupying more of his thoughts than the Governor liked, Borkians seemed content with their place in the galaxy.

Counsellor Erling stepped into the arched entry, awaiting the Governor’s permission to enter. Reuel waved him inside with an impatient hand.

“Sit, Erling.”

The stout Pyralian complied, accepting Reuel’s offer of an early refreshment. Sipping the strongly spiced beverage known as kafee, the Counsellor waited for Lord Shatar to speak.

“Tell me about the Earthling,” Reuel demanded abruptly, shutting off the console in front of him.

“I assume you’re referring to the Earthling female I had confined for her exuberant tongue?” Erling asked, knowing the Governor could be referring to none other, but wanting a few moments to plans his words.

Reuel’s subtle nod told Erling to continue.

“Politically, she is of no concern. She voiced her opinions with more emotion than reason. Earthlings are many things, but they aren’t fools. The majority of them are satisfied with their lot. Have no fear, I didn’t lay awake in my bed, waiting for a rebellion to erupt in the middle of the night, spurred by the dramatic words of a foolish female.”

“Then you think her ideas foolish as well?”

“Freedom is never foolish, Lord Governor. It is what we all strive for in one form or another.” The Counsellor reached for one of the pastries lying in front of him.

“Then what? Should I appoint an Earthling to sit on Pyrali’s Council, as our foolish female suggests?” Reuel was surprised Erling hadn’t condemned Christa immediately.

Erling laughed. “Have mercy, my lord. I have but four more years to serve before I retreat to my family village and live out my life in peace.”

“Then stop talking in riddles. I get enough of them from Minlim. If you found her words inspiring, then why did you hold her for questioning?”

“I thought a few days in the Quarters might

teach her patience. She has no husband for me to lecture about keeping her under control.” The Counsellor’s smile turned pensive. “As I said, she’s no danger politically, but I pity the man who ends up trying to domesticate her. She’s an avid student of Earthling history, which means she thrives on rebellion. Since I’m not her father, I couldn’t send her to a meditation chamber, so I used the next available option. Has someone complained about my decision?”

“No,” Reuel smiled. “She thinks she’s going to be exiled.”

“Good,” Erling said, reaching for another pastry. “Then prison served its purpose. Females need to know their perimeters. Pity she didn’t voice her ideas on Lyona Four. The Council there has the right to appoint an unbound female a husband.”

Reuel thought of the small planet in the southern quadrant. Lyonan custom matched females to males at a early age, then confined the young women to chastity colonies until they were claimed by their husbands. If a woman outlived her mate, the Council appointed her a new one. The Governor thought the idea had merit, especially after meeting Christa Kirklan.

“What are your plans for her?” Reuel asked.

“I’m going to have her brought to the Gallery, give her a stern lecture on controlling her tongue, then send her home.”

“With your permission, I’d like to be the one to deliver the lecture.”

Erling’s eyes went wide, but he didn’t question Reuel’s petition.

“Of course, my lord,” Erling said, standing. “Inform my assistant as to a convenient time. He will see that the chambers are empty.”

Reuel nodded, dismissing the Counsellor, as he reached out and turned on the console again. The Counsellor’s footsteps echoed through the large chamber as he departed, but the Governor was too engrossed in studying the personal files of Christa Kirklan to notice the politician’s retreat.

The Governor of Pyrali and the Counsellor weren’t the only ones who’d suffered the young woman’s defiant tongue. Although she’d graduated from the Academy with prestigious marks, several of her professors had noted her lack of cooperation. It seemed she had a reputation for starting debates they’d found difficult to end. Reuel wasn’t surprised. She’d matched him retort for retort the previous evening, until he’d scolded her for insulting Erling. Her acceptance of the mild reprimand had been short, but noticeable. Still, it hadn’t kept her from challenging him with her eyes. She hadn’t liked his admonishment, no matter how deserved, and she’d let him know it, flashing her resistance with ebony flames. The Governor found himself wondering if her eyes would burn as darkly in passion as they did in anger.

Minlim was right, the warrior in him wanted to tame Christa Kirklan. The thought of those dusky eyes watching him as he joined with her, taking her from innocence to the passionate realm of womanhood, made his heart begin to pound. He wanted to take her so deeply, so thoroughly, that she'd never again be able to look at him without remembering his touch.

Reuel frowned, confused by his attraction to the woman. Pleasure wasn't required for conception. His seed would take root, regardless of whether or not the female enjoyed its planting. Reuel switched off the console.

Standing up and walking to the western wall, he stared through the transparent shielding, forcing reality to replace fantasy.

The capitol city lay before him. Dacla was more than a governmental seat of power, it was the hub of the industrialized planet's markets, an economic metro of crystal buildings and nature parks.

Reuel smiled as he watched a covey of wild birds gather on the inland sea's western shore. They strolled along the water's edge, scooping up the cool water in their massive beaks, then straining the tiny waterlife from its liquid home and into their own bellies.

He watched the long-winged Farins for a few moments longer, wondering how he was going to convince an unruly female to be his wife.

Christa was too emotional to accept logic.

Foolish woman. No one, male or female, controlled their own destiny. The Cadish of the Seventh House knew that fact better than anyone.

Reuel reviewed his plan like the military strategy it was as he walked back to his desk and signaled for Minlim to join him. His training as a leader was going to prove invaluable in his new conquest. The best way to out-manuever his little rebel was to keep her on the defensive.

Thinking he'd found the answer to one dilemma, Reuel looked up as his sister entered the room.

"You have neglected to eat, lord brother," she said, placing a tray on the desk.

"Thank you, Taraza," he replied, giving her a warm smile. His sister was the youngest of four children. Delicately built, with dark hair and eyes a shade lighter than his own, she was dedicated to him. Meeting her pensive gaze, he knew the food she was serving was only an excuse to seek him out.

"Is there something on your mind, little one?"

"You haven't contacted Suriel's ship," she said hesitantly. "Lady Katala will be concerned."

"Being Governor is an absorbing task." Reuel wanted to tell Taraza the truth. But he didn't. No one knew the reason for his actions except Minlim and the physician who had diagnosed his disability. The decision couldn't be undone in

order to appease his sister's curiosity.

"You work so hard, my lord, and you rarely smile," she replied. "Hopefully, Lady Katala will remedy both."

"You are being presumptuous, Taraza," Reuel scolded her, laying the foundation for what was to come.

"I meant no offense, my lord," she apologized instantly.

"Lady Katala is the daughter of an honored friend. I will greet her with the same kindness I show anyone who supports the House of Shatar. To put more into my actions is to think you know my mind better than I know it myself."

His sister's expression said she didn't understand why he was reprimanding her. As much as Reuel regretted censuring her, he had no choice. His authority could not be questioned.

"If I may be excused, my lord," Taraza asked, lowering her head.

"I will see you at dinner," Reuel replied, offering what comfort he could. "If my duties do not require my presence elsewhere, we will play trits."

"It is my favorite game, my lord," she said, raising her head and smiling.

"Then I shall think about letting you win," Reuel teased.

Taraza was waiting for the doors to open when Reuel stopped her with his voice. "Have Peecha prepare the matron's suite."

“For Lady Katala?” His sister’s smile said she found the thought pleasing. Installing Katala in the suite joined to Reuel’s by the mating chamber substantiated the role Taraza assumed she would fill.

“No,” Reuel replied curtly. “Lady Katala will be housed in the east wing with the other women in the palace.”

“Then who...”

“That is of no concern to you,” Reuel cut off her question. “Do as I request.”

A reluctant nod accompanied his sister’s acceptance. “As you wish, my lord.”

Christa paced the room until she was certain her footprints would be as permanently embedded in the metallic tile as the Alliance’s insignia. It was past the high hour of the day and she had yet to be called to the Gallery chambers. The guard, who had brought her noon meal, had completely ignored her inquiry as to when she could expect to be called for her audience.

As much as she dreaded the confrontation, Christa wanted it over. Watching the day slip away one second at a time was making her nervous. She’d rehearsed her appeal, hoping it would satisfy the Council’s concerns that she wasn’t a troublemaker. She’d even practiced looking remorseful, praying she could maintain the facade long enough to be convincing. The longer she had

to wait, the harder it was to ignore the sense of trepidation seeping into her resolve.

Christa wheeled around at the sound of her cell being opened. Minlim stepped into the room, his cloak sweeping the floor behind him. Her heart eased its rapid pace as his calming blue eyes met hers.

“Forgive me,” Minlim smiled apologetically. “I have left you to yourself too long. I meant to share the noon meal with you, but unfortunately my master had need of my services, thus my delay. I seek your forgiveness.”

Christa smiled at the gracious apology. The moment the aging advisor had stepped into the room she’d felt her spirit lifting. She’d never encountered a Haodai before, although she’d heard of their psychic powers. Minlim had assured her he couldn’t read her thoughts, but he was able to sense her moods. Christa suspected he’d been overly pleasant on purpose, sensing her frustration. Whatever his motive, she was glad to have someone other than herself to talk to.

“Please, sit down. I was going to have a cup of tea,” Christa offered, motioning toward the long bench beside the balcony entrance.

“Thank you,” Minlim replied, walking slowly toward the cushioned seat.

Christa waited until she’d poured their refreshment, before speaking again. She handed Minlim the steaming cup, then smiled. “You were so

silent last evening, I thought I had offended you. If so, please accept my apology.”

The slender advisor gave her a warm smile. “You were too busy offending my master.”

Christa flinched slightly with guilt.

“I seem to offend most men,” she said softly, walking across the room and seating herself in the small parlor’s only chair.

“Do you enjoy offending other men, as much as you enjoyed offending Lord Shatar?”

Christa laughed. “I must confess, bantering with a Governor did lighten my day.”

“Reuel is unaccustomed to having a female meet his gaze or question his authority.”

“Reuel!” Christa exclaimed, then laughed again. “I should have known. The name suits him to perfection.”

“Do not make the mistake of thinking you understand him, Christa. Lord Shatar is a very complicated man,” Minlim warned softly. “He does not use his powerful selfishly, but that doesn’t mean he will not use it to serve his purpose, if you provoke him.”

Christa’s humor fled with Minlim’s final words.

“Is that why my audience with the Council has been delayed? Is Lord Shatar deciding my fate in their stead?”

“You will have your audience, Christa.”

“When?” Christa asked, sensing from the Haodai’s tone it would be soon.

“I am to escort you to the Gallery,” Minlim said, taking another leisurely sip of his tea. “But there is time. I find myself curious about your ideas. Tell me what it is about your life you find so unsatisfactory you would risk exile to change it.”

Christa frowned. “I’m not unsatisfied with my life.”

“I sense otherwise, fair lady,” Minlim gently contradicted her. “It is often in finding what we lack that we realize what we seek.”

“Is that a Haodai truism?”

Minlim chuckled. “No. Merely a piece of wisdom over a hundred years of living has gained me.”

“The only thing I’m seeking is equality for my people,” Christa stated.

“Your people seem pleased with their life on Pyrali. They have prospered and multiplied,” Minlim reminded her. “You, yourself, were born on this world.”

“A world I can’t call home,” Christa complained, feeling the frustrations surfacing again. “I was born here, but I’m as alien to this world as the dali ferns in the courtyard. I’m here because of a freak act of fate, a ship that survived the Barrier.

“No amount of assimilation will change the fact that I’m an Earthling. My world lies beyond the Great Barrier, unreachable by even Alliance starcruisers. My identity is there, not here. My

heritage is forever out of my grasp. Is it so difficult to understand why I want my people to be proud of who and what they are? If we allow ourselves to become just another humanoid form bent to the will of the noble Alliance, we will eventually forget that we once ruled a solar system.”

“Pride often fuels adventure,” Minlim noted. “It can also aid disaster.”

Christa wasn’t to be dissuaded. “Or fire inspiration.”

“Would it not be best to wait until inspiration flows naturally? Freedom can be won easily in battle, but being free quickly binds one with obligation and duty.”

“My people aren’t afraid of obligation,” Christa replied with conviction. “I think the Alliance fears us more than we fear it. If not, why would they insist on restricting us to this planet? Because our muscles provide ample strength for their farms and mines or because they sense we would prosper no matter where we went?”

“The reason your race has been confined is not as glamorous as you would like to believe,” Minlim explained. “There are very few of you. To allow you to roam the galaxy at will would decrease the number of your breeding couples. Your race could easily disappear if not properly procreated. That would be the greatest loss to your people.”

“So the Alliance Ruling Council has said,”

Christa admitted unconvinced. “If we are such a prized people, then why are we refused a voice in the government that considers us so valuable?”

Minlim smiled, then stood up. “Perhaps that question is best asked of one who sits on the Ruling Council.”

“Governor Shatar?” Christa tried to hide her apprehension although she knew the Haodai would sense it.

“Come, he awaits us,” Minlim stated, walking toward the door. When he noticed Christa wasn’t following, he turned around and gave her a reassuring look. “Do not be afraid, fair lady. No harm will come to you.”

Christa wished she shared the Haodai’s faith. She didn’t. She followed Minlim to the door, stepping into the corridor. The moment she was outside the room, six guards surrounded her. Gasping in surprise, Christa stepped back, only to feel the cold metal of the door against her back. The Adarian guards stared at her impassively.

“Come,” Minlim said, gesturing for her to walk beside him. “They are my master’s personal guardians.”

Christa gave the sedate soldiers a suspicious look, then stepped forward. Minlim’s silent footsteps were joined by the booted feet of the Governor’s guards as they walked down the corridor that led to the Gallery’s main hall. Once they’d reached the ornately decorated doors, the

soldiers stopped.

“My master awaits you,” Minlim said, stepping aside as the doors opened for her entry.

Christa stepped inside, blinking for a moment after the doors shut behind her with a soft hiss of air. The Gallery was unlit except for the hazy light that filtered through its crystal dome. She could see the glazed floor of the room, the symbol of the Alliance inlaid in its center. The highly polished tile reflected the sun’s light, sending a shimmering rainbow of golden colors through the circular room. Small parapets, sprouting from the second floor of the huge chamber, lined the walls, each assigned to a representative.

The Gallery was a combination courtroom, voting chamber and public arena. Today it was empty except for the man standing in the center of the room outlined in golden light and resembling an ancient warrior awaiting his bounty.

Christa inhaled, gathering her strength around her like a talisman. She started the walk down the slanted runway that would take her to the main level of the three-tiered auditorium. When she reached the bottom tier, she hesitated.

The Governor of Pyrali was smiling. The expression seemed out of place on his angular face. He was toying with her, hoping to make her nervous. Not that she needed any assistance. Forcing herself to stay calm, she stepped into the muted light, determined not to give Lord Shatar

the satisfaction of seeing her fear.

“Pyralian law states I’m to be allowed an audience with the entire Council,” Christa said, hoping her voice sounded more convincing to the Governor’s ears than it did to her own.

Finding herself alone with the Cadish of the Seventh House upset Christa in ways she didn’t care to analyze. The man oozed authority. His dark hair was pulled back from his face, its tendency to curl tamed by a tightly knotted thong at the base of his neck. His uniform fit him perfectly, emphasizing his wide shoulders and long limbs. The silver cloak, draped and clasped over his shoulders, accented jeweled colored eyes staring at Christa with a such a fierce intensity they held emotions she couldn’t read.

“Pyralian law states whatever I wish it to state,” Reuel replied calmly. “Come closer, *cassana*. I can hear your complaints better if I don’t have to strain my ears.”

“I’m honored, Lord Governor,” Christa said, remembering this would be her only opportunity to vindicate herself. She had to control her temper. As much as Christa wanted to choke on the words, she said them. “Perhaps I forgot my manners when we last met.”

Reuel laughed. “Are you trying to placate me, *cassana*? It isn’t necessary. I’m a fair man. I’ll hear your appeal and render an equitable judgment.”

Christa’s reply was meant for the Governor’s

arrogant smile, rather than his words. “Will you, my lord? I fear you may be biased. Minlim told me you are not accustomed to having females disagree with your royal opinions.”

Reuel’s smile changed, becoming more suspicious than amused. “Did he? What else has my esteemed advisor told you?”

“Nothing that I didn’t already know,” Christa said calmly. “I’m a very good observer of people. It’s one of my favorite pastimes.”

“And what have your observations told you of me, *cassana*?”

When the huskily whispered question reached Christa’s ears, it sent shimmering fingers of sensation down her spine. It wasn’t the Governor of Pyrali asking the question, it was the man.

Reuel stepped forward, shortening the distance between them. He moved into a shaft of light, his image quickly changing from that of a specter profiled in amber hues to a predatory animal whose sensual stance was pure male.

Christa swallowed hard, forcing her apprehension to remain inside. She met his emerald stare. His eyes, slanted slightly upward like those of a big cat, seemed to penetrate her resolve, wrapping it in velvet fingers and pulling it slowly away. The primitive sensuality that had invaded her thoughts the previous evening returned, seeping through her determination to remain indifferent.

Afraid she would surrender to his proximity,

Christa stepped back, gathering her restraint. “The same things I observe about most males, my lord. Governor or not, you are still a man. Which means you prefer my gender subservient and submissive. To find us otherwise irritates you.”

“I do find you irritating, *cassana*, but I also find you extremely desirable.”

The sensuous declaration lingered between them, filling the air with a tangible tension that turned Christa’s skin warm and sent her mind racing. She’d come to the Gallery expecting rejection or exile. Her judge’s words, spoken in a soft whisper that accented the vehement gaze of his luminous eyes, didn’t offer retribution. Instead, they promised a seductive reward the woman in her found almost impossible to refuse.

Christa had seen few Adarian females. Those she had come in contact with seemed almost docile. Kept inside the shielded walls of the inner city they claimed as their domain, a female Adarian was not allowed beyond the perimeter without an escort. That fact brought Christa back from the sensual abyss where Reuel’s words had sent her. An Adarian mating chamber or an isolation hut, both were ostracism.

“That’s unfortunate, Lord Governor,” Christa said coldly. “I can’t see myself as an obliging female on an invisible leash of custom and protocol, smiling up at my noble master, because he’s favored me with a walk in the plaza.”

Reuel had prepared himself for Christa's resistance. He'd expected nothing less of his enthusiastic separatist. Stepping closer, he reached out and lifted the plait of gold hair off her shoulder, lacing it through his open palm before letting it fall behind her back.

"Can you envision yourself as my lover, *cassana*?"

Christa fought the erotic concept, struggling against the tingling shudders that racked her body. The potent illusion refused to retreat, filling her mind with pictures of tangled bodies and exotic pleasures. She blinked her eyes, forcing the images away.

She wasn't being judged. She was being seduced.

The Governor of Pyrali was making a mockery of the very rights she'd stood in front of the Council to petition.

"No, Lord Governor," Christa said neutrally, "I can not."

Reuel knew Christa was fighting the attraction between them. His first thought had been to fight it himself, but then he'd decided to use it to his advantage. Earthling or not, Christa was a passionate female. That passion could be harnessed and used to accomplish his goals. The Cadish of the Seventh House had no hesitation in doing just that. Friend or foe, Christa would accept his proposal and bear his child.

As much as he wanted to pull her into his arms and make her admit, that very second, how much she wanted him, Reuel returned to the center of the room, planting his feet firmly in the center of the circle that represented his duty. When he turned to look at her, there was nothing reassuring in his verdant eyes.

“Then, perhaps, you can envision yourself as the sole occupant of an asteroid in the western sector of the Great Barrier?”

Christa gasped. She’d anticipated indifference, if not exile, but she’d never expected blackmail. Her fists clinched unconsciously, her eyes blazing with indignation at being so blatantly propositioned. The temper she’d momentarily caged erupted into instant fury. She was too angry to be eloquent.

“I’d gladly spend eternity on a clump of cold rock, if it meant seeing the last of you, my lord!”

























































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































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